

*foreword by* J. I. PACKER

# TRANSLATING TRUTH



*The Case for Essentially Literal Bible Translation*

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# PUBLISHER'S NOTE

THE ESSAYS INCLUDED in this volume were first presented as papers at the annual meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society in November 2004. The purpose of publishing these papers now as a collection is to encourage the ongoing, careful reflection on methodology and issues in Bible translation—that necessary work, which the Christian church is called to undertake, with fear and trembling before our sovereign, holy God, for the sake of the gospel and the truth of God's Word.

We are grateful for the insights expressed in this volume on a variety of issues and from a number of perspectives. Each of the contributors was part of the fourteen-member Translation Oversight Committee for the English Standard Version (ESV) Bible, published in 2001.\* We are likewise grateful to Dr. J. I. Packer, who served as General Editor for the ESV Bible, for his foreword to this volume, which provides a very helpful framework for understanding and carrying forward the discussion.

The words of the Bible are the very words of God, and so the work of translating these words is of utmost importance, with eternal consequences. As Jesus said, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4); or as Peter confessed, “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). The work of Bible translation may be undertaken only with fear and trembling and abject dependence on our sovereign, holy Lord, with the understanding (as noted in the preface to the ESV Bible) that, “We know that no Bible translation is perfect or final; but we also know that God uses imperfect and inadequate things to his honor and praise.

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\*For further information about the English Standard Version (ESV) Bible, please visit the ESV website at [esvbible.org](http://esvbible.org).

So to our triune God and to his people we offer what we have done, with our prayers that it may prove useful, with gratitude for much help given, and with ongoing wonder that our God should ever have entrusted to us so momentous a task.”

*Soli Deo Gloria!*—To God alone be the glory!

—Lane T. Dennis, Ph.D.  
President and Publisher

# FOREWORD

IT IS ONE OF THE glories of God's grace to a sinful world that he constantly speaks in and through Holy Scripture to Christian minds and hearts, as the Holy Spirit illuminates the ancient words and applies their message to us to meet new situations and needs. Digging into Scripture, therefore, is one of the most life-giving things believers ever do.

Evangelical Christians have always known this, and Bible study (meaning careful, prayerful, thoughtful reading and rereading of the text, with or without the help of books and notes) has always been the central feature of evangelical private devotion. The mainstream church's Trinitarian, incarnational, historical-redemptive understanding of biblical faith—the only understanding, in fact, that the canonical corpus will yield—has been the interpretative base for this searching of the Scriptures from the start. For most of the nineteenth century, following the Evangelical Revival in Britain and the two Great Awakenings in America, the religion of the Protestant churches both sides of the Atlantic was essentially evangelical; the historic faith was faithfully taught by preaching, catechizing, and distribution of literature, and diligent reading of the King James Version both privately and in the family was a fixed point in Christian discipleship.

In those days, Christianity was strong. But in the twentieth century both the ministry of teaching biblical truth and biblical living and the discipline of feeding on the Bible at home crumbled away. As uncertainty about the contents of the Bible grew through the skepticism and revisionism of liberal scholarship, so interest in the Bible declined throughout the Western world. Today, adult members of churches in most cases have never been taught the Christian faith by anybody, and the Bible is to them a closed book—or, should they perchance dip into it, a bewilderment from start to finish. Back in Britain, almost two generations ago, I heard it declared that the minister's first priority is to teach, and

his second priority is to teach, and his third priority is to teach. More than fifty years of not doing this have inevitably hastened the decline of interest in the Bible and in effect promoted the sense of its irrelevance to modern life.

Facing this pervasive shrinkage of Bible knowledge and influence, many in the churches hoped that simplifying and streamlining public worship would bring people back to the life of devotion and that simplified and streamlined versions of Holy Scripture would bring people back to the habit of Bible reading. Neither hope has been fulfilled in today's post-Christian West, nor seems likely to be. But both programs have been zealously pursued, and as a result the English-speaking world has before it not only the kaleidoscope of "blended worship" but also more translations of the Bible than this or any other language group has ever had. Surveying the translations produced within the past sixty years, we find that they fall into three categories, the third of which is an extension of the second.

The usual label for the first category is "word-for-word" or "essentially literal" translations. Understanding translation as the discipline of tuning in to writers of other times and other cultures, as well as of other languages, these versions aim to be as transparent as possible to the vocabulary, sentence structure, thought process, literary purpose, situational context, personal style, rhetorical strategy, and communicatory technique of each Bible author, within the limits that good English allows. This was the path traveled by William Tyndale and the King James Version (both with what by today's standards was some license); and it is the path that is now traveled by the Revised Standard Version (with much literary skill but some academically inspired blurring), the New King James Version and the New American Standard Version (both with greater accuracy, but less literary grace), and by the English Standard Version, with the New Revised Standard Version, the New English Translation, and the Holman Christian Standard Version not far behind.

These versions are not, of course, word-for-word in any mechanical sense; they seek simply to catch all the meaning that the text expresses, book by book, section by section, paragraph by paragraph, and sentence by sentence, in a way that the original writer, were he with us today, would recognize as a full and exact rendering of what he

sought to put across to his own readership, now expressed in clusters of English words that as far as possible match those that he used himself. Translations of this type require the reader to learn what he can about the ancient and in some ways alien culture in which the text is steeped, knowing that he will miss some of the meaning unless he does so. Plainly, these versions will yield their richest rewards when linked with the helps of an ongoing expository ministry in the pulpit, a commentary and Bible dictionary handy at home, and a heart passionate to know God.

The second category is usually labeled “thought-for-thought” or “dynamic equivalent” renderings. Here the translators’ avowed aim is to induce, directly and immediately, the same positive complex of compelling interest and intellectual, emotional, and volitional response that the original writers sought to trigger in their own readership, and the developed method is to modify the wording and imagery of the text as a means to this end. Lively English covering the semantic field of the original in a consistently colloquial way, bringing out its implications without being bound by its sentence structure, is the goal. Examples are the Good News Bible, the Living Bible and the New Living Translation (the latter a skillful, scholarly recasting of the former), the Contemporary English Version, the New Century Bible, and God’s Word. All are beamed first and foremost on adolescents and young adults who, so it is hoped, may be newly drawn into Bible reading by the brisk, vivid, even chummy way that everything is expressed.

The problem areas along this path are obvious. They all arise from the fact that what is being offered as a translation is trying to be an interpretative, evocative, applicatory paraphrase as well. To want to induce as clear an awareness as possible that the Bible story is the first part of our own story because the God of the Bible is God for us too is right, but a price has to be paid for this wholesale streamlining of Scripture. The danger is that by trying to be more than a translation, each “dynamic equivalent” version becomes less than a translation, in at least the following ways.

First, *focus is blurred*. Where the exact meaning of the text is elusive and more than one understanding is possible, this method requires a smooth rendering of the translators’ views that will leave readers unaware that any difficulty and range of options exists at all. When the text contains technical terms (and there are many such in both

Testaments), the ideal of verbal informality will lead to an obscuring of their presence. (Example: “the righteousness of God” is a key technical phrase in Paul, most notably in Romans, but it does not appear in any of the dynamic equivalent versions that I mentioned, being paraphrased out every time.) If translating means expressing in another language the full meaning and character of the original as exactly as possible, this is under-translating.

Second, *fidelity is restricted*. When it is thought that a literal rendering would not be at once fully lucid to the casual reader, this method requires the substituting of present-day word pictures that may convey equivalent meaning with the same tone and thrust as the original had. But the reader, of course, will never know where this has been done or what it was that was changed, and evidently it is assumed that that does not matter. Does it not? When missionaries translating the New Testament for Arctic-dwellers designated the Lord Jesus Christ “the seal of God,” because their intended readers did not know what a lamb was, perhaps it did not matter, and perhaps it was the best that could be done. Whether that is so when the original is intelligible and the change is only for warmth and chattiness is, however, more doubtful. Example: the Hebrew of Ecclesiastes 9:8 translates as, “Let your garments be always white. Let not oil be lacking on your head” (ESV). The New Living Translation reads, “Wear fine clothes, with a dash of cologne!” The point being made is, enjoy life’s God-given enjoyments to the full. Is this change justified by the gain it brings in understanding? If the Hebrew words are not just the human writer’s choice but God’s own choice for communicating with us through what his penmen wrote, are changes of this kind justified at all? One begins to imagine wordsmiths like Ecclesiastes himself, and Isaiah, and Paul, looking down from heaven at our array of translations, and groaning again and again, “But that’s not what I *wrote!*” If translation means serving authors by making what they wrote fully available in other languages (and surely Bible translation, whatever more it is, is at least that), what is being done here is under-translating.

Third, *foreshortening is imposed*—cultural foreshortening, that is. Colloquial paraphrase, however dynamically equivalent, cannot but pre-empt recognition of the cultural gap between the Bible worlds (there are several: Egyptian, Palestinian before and after the Exile, Persian, Greco-

Roman are the main ones) and our own world of today. This is very obvious in relation to the dash of cologne in the example we have just considered. Distancing (that is, discerning the differences between our world and worlds of the past) must precede assimilation (identifying transcendent similarities that reach above and beyond the differences). Cutting corners here, in rendering literature from the past—the Judeo-Christian past no less than any other—is always under-translating.

The third category of latter-day translations may be called exposition-for-text, or expanded paraphrase, renderings. These elaborate and amplify what is found in the semantic field of each text and passage, just as a pulpit expositor might do. The best-known examples are both one-man efforts: J. B. Phillips's *The New Testament in Modern English* and Eugene Peterson's *The Message*. The danger with them, obviously, is that they may read into the text more than is actually there—a lapse for which the fitting name would be over-translating.

In the essays that follow the weaknesses and limitations of some latter-day versions are bracingly highlighted. Let it be said that no one is implying that any type of dynamic equivalent rendering is useless. Even if the hope that a retranslated Bible could create for itself a new readership outside the church proves to be a pipe dream, many in churches where Bible study was no big thing will testify that the easy-flowing modern idiom of this or that new version has made Scripture accessible to them, and has shown them its relevance for them, in quite a new way. The true verdict seems to be that for beginners in Bible exploration and study, the merits of the best dynamic equivalent versions outweigh their real limitations. But for lifelong personal reading, with meditation and memorization, just as for public reading and pulpit exposition in church, the better option will unquestionably be one of the essentially literal translations; and I hope I may without offense mention here the English Standard Version, which was deliberately crafted to fulfill all these purposes together and, I believe, does so.

—J. I. Packer

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